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ABSTRACT

The importance of considering social contexts--workplace, family, and community networks--in devising adult literacy programs has emerged over the past decade as the clear consensus of adult literacy research. Equally important have been the attempts by field researchers and federal policymakers to use these findings in setting up demonstration programs and in providing general guidance on how to establish such programs in different adult contexts. Among the more important implications of a contextual policy approach has been the call for more comprehensive approaches to serving adults. One innovation in adult literacy development has been the family literacy strategy. However, family and workplace literacy programs, as currently structured, need to be more informed by the cultural or social context of program participants. Barriers to implementation of contextual literacy policy include the issues of transfer, definition, measurement, and effective literacy instruction. To meet the challenges of adult literacy development, a better understanding of the cultural contexts in which adults function is required. Significant bodies of research illuminate the importance of cultural knowledge for more successful educational intervention. Policymakers at the state level must tailor literacy strategies that are informed by the particular social contexts of their communities. (18 references) (YLB)

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BUILDING BRIDGES OF MEANING:

THE ROLE OF CONTEXTUAL LITERACY

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BUILDING BRIDGES OF MEANING:

THE ROLE OF CONTEXTUAL LITERACY

Programs and policies designed to improve the literacy skills of America's adult population need to be informed by one central fact: adults who come into programs are volunteers. Adult literacy programs rarely compete with each other for students; they do compete with other demands upon an adult's time, energy, and commitments. The "campaign" approach toward "eradicating" illiteracy typically concentrates on attracting adults into programs, relying primarily on slogans such as "it's never too late to learn to read." The implicit assumption of such approaches is that wanting to learn in the ways and with the content that most programs teach is sufficient to attract adults into programs. What is not as frequently recognized is that adult literacy programs are plagued by high absenteeism, high drop-out rates, and, too often, insignificant learning gains (Diekhoff, 1988). Programs experiencing such problems and their public or lay supporters often grapple with these problems by asking why more adults do not come forward--rather than seeking answers to why so many adults leave. Seldom does public examination of the literacy problem extend to the failures of programs to address the main variable in an adult's decision to seek literacy assistance: that is, motivation.

The relative silence on the question of motivation or the characterization of an adult's reluctance to enter a program as being caused by shame or embarrassment does not do justice to alternative explanations: for instance, adults may not see the relative need for literacy in their particular circumstances or "contexts." They may not see that a "literacy" or "reading" program as such will make a difference in improving the quality of their lives--after having tried one personally or learning from friends, relatives, or neighbors who have. Finally, adults who are the target of literacy campaigns may not see themselves as "illiterate" if they are capable of reading and writing in simple terms or if they can complete such tasks with the help of others.

Recourse to public discussions of the issue of adult illiteracy, then, does not provide much clarity on how programs can be improved or how policymakers should proceed. It is more than worthwhile to examine the record of research and listen to seasoned practitioners on issues such as these where "common sense" explanations may limit our ability to understand and therefore to act wisely. And in times such as these, when we have "more will than we have wallet," we need all the wisdom we can get.

Wisdom in the field of adult literacy is most systematically supplied by the academic research community; but while research may be the necessary condition of better policy and practice, it is not sufficient--as a cursory review of the last four years shows. In 1984, as part of a renewed interest in the issue of adult illiteracy, the U.S. Department of Education and the Army Research Institute hosted a Research Implications conference that called for the translation of research into practice. Around the same time The National Adult Literacy Project (NALP) received over $800,000 in discretionary funds from the National Institute of Education (NIE) to complete a survey of the topic as part of the Department's initiative in adult literacy; one of the resulting papers was a research and development agenda. In 1986 the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) sponsored another conference which had as its aim the development of a research agenda in adult literacy. Also in 1986, National Assessment of Educational Progress produced (at a cost of over $2 million) its definitive study, assessing functional literacy abilities among the young adult population, ages 21 to 25. In 1987 the Division of Adult Education and the Adult Literacy Initiative assembled yet another meeting to devise a series of recommendations for practitioners, distilled from what was known into one of the Department's popular "What Works" series. (Various reviewers of this document concluded that there was not a solid base of research from which conclusions could be drawn for literacy practitioners.) Finally, late in 1987 the National Advisory Council of Adult Education sponsored a conference entitled, "Toward a Definition of Literacy."

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL CONTEXT IN LITERACY DEVELOPMENT:

The Research Implications Conference of 1984, sponsored by NIE, the Adult Literacy Initiative, and the Army Research Institute, highlighted the critical role of contextual approaches in developing strategies for outreach, curriculum design, taking advantage of "spontaneous literacy development," i.e. in the use and acquisition of literacy in daily life. An unpublished summary of the conference made the point this way: "Recognizing that varied and specific social contexts characterize both a student's instructional environment and daily experiences, research indicates the need to establish links between these distinctive contexts in order for the learning experience to have maximum value" (NIE, 1984). To suggest the practical implications for programs, many researchers, including those involved in a field study of the National Adult Literacy Project, have highlighted the use of small-group instruction or peer tutoring as a way of affirming the importance of shared values in the development of literacy. Lerche cites the experiences of literacy program directors and teachers in **Effective Adult Literacy Programs: A Practitioner's Guide** (Cambridge, 1985). Such willingness to develop curriculum around the needs of adults as members of a community--to treat the knowledge that adults bring with them and that enables them to function as beginning points of learning--is more characteristic of successful programs. These programs affirm that the acquisition of knowledge, at least among those adults hardest to reach and

most in need, is highly dependent on the cultural values, trusted networks, and neighborhood institutions of the adult. Development of curricula, group discussions, and the involvement of adults in program management reinforce the extent to which adult learning involves more social learning than do school-oriented programs.

The consensus surrounding the importance of context defining purpose for adult literacy tasks surfaces again in the National Assessment of Educational Progress' **Literacy: Profiles of America's Young Adults.** Kirsch and Jungblut (1986) spell out another important implication of the contextual approach when attempting to define, measure, or assess literacy:

> NAEP's assessment of young adults was concerned primarily with the processes of literacy rather than with literacy as a single standard. The concept adopted for this study views literacy as the application of skills for specific purposes in specific contexts and not simply as an isolated set of skills associated with reading and writing. It was expected that the wide variety of activities related to printed or written material was likely to require different types of literacy skills for successful performance. Moreover, given both the complexity and diversity of literacy tasks in social contexts, it was deemed inappropriate to attempt to categorize individual as as either 'literate' or 'illiterate.'"

While the contextual approach has clearly influenced the definition chosen by the NAEP Young Adult Study, the evident ambivalence on the part of policymakers resulted in a symposium sponsored by the National Advisory Council of Adult Education entitled "Toward a Definition of Literacy." A review of the majority of papers presented at the symposium, however, reveals no major disagreements with the view that literacy is best defined by social context. One paper, "Literacy for What Purpose?", provides a useful synopsis of field research and its implications for policy and practice (Mikulecky, 1987). One of the more important observations made at the symposium, as revealed in this paper, is the role of social networks and the extent to which they can support or impair literacy development. Mikulecky concludes: "Some supportive social relationships and networks can help low literates to function while at the same time preventing them from changing, growing, or moving into more literate areas. Educators and policy-makers need to recognize that literacy improvement may sometimes hinge on providing the support necessary for relationships and networks to change along with their members."

Much of what researchers in adult literacy and, more generally, what researchers targeting "at-risk" populations have to say is based on an examination of the social contexts in which individuals function. These contexts help define the particular practices of literacy and "basic skills," the motivations or barriers to literacy development, and the support or value that literacy has in various communities. The recourse to social contexts--which include peer or community networks, family, and the workplace--takes on the perspective of the individual, the potential or

actual adult learner, and places significant emphasis on the prior knowledge of the adult as the actual starting point of all learning. To say, as David Harman says, that "literacy is contextual" points the way to more informed practice and clearer perspectives for policy. It also challenges much of the received wisdom of educational practice: that literacy or "skill development" is a value-free enterprise which takes place in a cultural vacuum and that students can transfer school-based or more academic instruction into any particular context.

A review of the historical record, then, of the period from 1984 to 1988 shows that adult literacy was a topic which excited much interest, involving the educational research community in a significant way. But while a review of the research record is not necessarily edifying, it is at least necessary, particularly for policymakers in the Congress and the Executive branch as well as those in the states. For while research over this period has reached some consensus on "what works" in the development of adult literacy, not enough attention has been given as to how policy has been informed by research or to what remains to be done at the policy level to translate research into the improvement of practice. It is important to examine the crucial findings of the latest research and the resulting policies in order to illuminate the opportunities and the barriers for policymakers in the field of adult literacy and to suggest, more broadly, what can be gained from adult literacy research and practice that can provide more focus for education and welfare reform in the states.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH:

The importance of considering social contexts--workplace, family, and community networks--in devising adult literacy programs has emerged over the past decade as the clear consensus of adult literacy research. Equally important have been the attempts by field researchers and Federal policymakers to operationalize these findings in setting up demonstration programs and in providing general guidance on how to establish such programs in different adult contexts. Among the more important implications of a contextual policy approach has been the call for more comprehensive approaches to serving adults--approaches that call for the involvement of not only literacy educators but also social service and job training agencies and community non-profit organizations.

Field Research:

One interesting attempt to utilize the social networks of "at-risk" young adults in literacy development is found in the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's "Making the Connection: A Report for Literacy Volunteers Working with Out-of-School Youth" (1986). This study focused on young high school drop-outs who also were "runaways." Field researchers went to great lengths to understand the literacy practices and abilities of this selected target group,

examining in depth their reasons for leaving both school and their families. Among the many virtues of this study is the extent to which it refuses to stereotype these drop-outs who have had to become wise in the ways of the streets. An emphasis on the value-laden nature of literacy development is obvious throughout the study, specifically as it applies to this particular population:

> Because literacy has a social significance that ties reading and writing skills to achievement, success, and acceptability in the straight world, literacy is not socially neutral, but a socially highly loaded issue for street youth. Literacy represents a struggle they are waging between the values of their marginal lifestyle and the values of the culture they have left; their attitudes about literacy directly reflect this internal conflict. Street youth do not easily admit that their reading and writing skills are insufficient for their current lives; rather they tend to assert that they don't need any skills they don't have. (Conklin and Hurtig, 1986).

In order to ascertain the literacy abilities of the eighty young adults involved in the study, the researchers had to make use of community "drop-in" centers where the "runaways" who were more interested in finding their way back into the "straight world" might come for help. Using this relatively small sample, the report found that, while the young people tended to assert their ability to cope with functional reading and writing tasks, almost half (44%) had difficulty in completing a job application. The study suggests various practical ways that literacy "programming" can be developed around the specific functional needs of street youth, using non-threatening settings, and building upon an accurate assessment of existing literacy abilities. Finally, the authors argue for an approach to this unique population that is more comprehensive, one that uses existing youth-oriented social service agencies as sites for literacy training.

Federal Initiatives:

The case for literacy development in non-traditional, contextual settings finds its clearest expression in "workplace literacy" programs. As in the case of the street youth studied in "Making the Connection," the goal of employability or promotion is a powerful motivator for adults to improve their literacy or "basic" skills. Military research revealed that the most effective way to deliver literacy instruction was to gear it to the actual tasks servicemen faced on the job. For instance, in three job-specific reading programs, servicemen and women demonstrated average gains from 20 to 36% after 60 to 120 hours of instruction, with 80% retention rates of material learned three months after completing the programs (Philippi, 1988). This research led the General Accounting Office to recommend to Congress that literacy training in the services be made directly relevant to military jobs. The Congress, in turn, mandated that all "basic skills," remedial, or literacy programs offered during duty hours be tied to jobs (Duffy, 1983). This policy has resulted in a major reorientation in literacy/basic skills curriculum development in the military that is just

beginning to filter through to the civilian world.

One medium for the transfer of military research to the private sector and the states has been the collaboration of the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor. Two projects in particular have been responsible for providing guidance to states and to corporations interested in improving the basic skills of the workforce: first, the publication of a booklet, **The Bottom Line**; and second, a technology transfer project (with the Department of Defense) that is developing a civilian version of the Army's computer-based Job Skills Education Program (JSEP). Both of these attempts to influence the policy and practice of literacy/basic skills development have challenged the generic literacy, school-based approach that military researchers found deficient in the 1970's. **The Bottom Line**, for instance, suggests a process of developing job-oriented curricula that requires a "literacy audit" to determine job-specific literacy requirements and an assessment of the workers' proficiency in meeting these requirements (USDOE/USDOL, 1988). The assessment and evaluation system used in the JSEP program measures basic skills proficiency in the context of a particular military occupation specialty (MOS); in other words, success in the instructional program is measured by the mastery of job-related competencies--not in terms of normed "grade level" gains typical of generic literacy or basic skills programs.

The Congress also has lent its weight to the importance of context in the delivery of adult literacy/basic skills programs in two major initiatives in 1988: the "Workplace Literacy" demonstration grants program (as part of the amendments of the Adult Education Act) and the "Even Start" Act under Compensatory Education. With the workplace literacy grants the Congress mandated that programs should "be designed to improve the productivity of the workforce through the improvement of literacy skills needed in the workplace" by, among other activities, providing adult literacy and other basic skills services and activities, meeting the literacy needs of adults with limited English proficiency, and improving the competency of adult workers in speaking, listening, reasoning, and problem solving. Also, the Congress passed the "Even Start" Act which funded demonstration grants under Compensatory Education or Chapter I to provide "family-centered education programs which involve parents and children in a cooperative effort to help parents become full partners in the education of their children and to assist children in reaching their full potential as learners."

Both the Administration and Congressional initiatives show the influence of a more contextual view of adult literacy/basic skills instruction. The workplace and family literacy demonstration programs as well as the discretionary support of publications and technology transfer underscore the importance of literacy for education reform and economic competitiveness. From the standpoint of practice the endorsement of contextual learning in these initiatives acknowledged two central motivations of adults in pursuing literacy or basic skills instruction: the desire to improve their economic circumstances and the desire to be more fully involved in the

education of their children. Finally, these Federal efforts have provided a more definitive context in which state policymakers can include literacy/basic skills improvement in the planning and programming of social service, job training, and education agencies.

State and Private Foundation Initiatives:

The clearest example of innovation in adult literacy development that is related to contextual approaches is the family literacy strategy, pioneered by the state of Kentucky with the Parent and Child Education (PACE) program. This award-winning program uses the elementary school setting to provide adult and early childhood education. It builds upon the parents' motivation--to be more involved in the education of their children while furthering their own. PACE also serves as an example of a more comprehensive policy approach in that is seeks to solve two major problems of adult literacy programs--transportation and child care--by using the resources of public schools. Significantly, the PACE program is billed as an education reform strategy which ties school success of children from disadvantaged homes to improving their school readiness and the literacy skills of their parents.

An elaboration of the PACE model that is more clearly linked to the provision of adult literacy and vocational services is seen in the model being developed by the Kenan Family Literacy Project. The genesis of this project was related to the efforts of federal policymakers to capitalize on the innovation of the states and to further develop the implications of contextual research. The support for this experimental program by the Kenan Charitable Trust came as a result of Secretary William Bennett's endorsement of the concept that working with parents of disadvantaged children could serve to support school success. Again, the emphasis on family literacy programs as part of an early intervention strategy was in keeping with the literacy policy advocated by Bennett, i.e. preventing illiteracy by improving elementary and secondary schooling. The strongest statement made by the Bennett "What Works" series that bears upon the problem of adults with limited literacy skills is found in **Educating Disadvantaged Children: Schools that Work**:

> All parents, regardless of education and income level, exert an important influence on their children's motivation and behavior. By actions and words they teach children the importance of education, hard work, good behavior, and high aspirations. Parents and guardians of disadvantaged children should learn to do their utmost to help children succeed in school.

Another family literacy model which has not received as much publicity as the PACE or the Kenan programs is the Home Instructional Program for Pre-School Youth (HIPPY). The unique feature of this international early childhood intervention program, developed by Dr. Avima Lombard of Hebrew University, is the use of paraprofessionals and their children to work with mothers of four -year-olds in their homes. The "lessons" in this home curriculum include language

instruction, sensory discrimination activities, and problem solving. The evolution of HIPPY in sites such as Arkansas has been toward the use of this strategy for adult literacy development. Positive results of this program have included the parents' wanting to pursue their education or becoming involved in job-training programs. The latter result has led to funding for these programs in Arkansas and Mississippi coming primarily from the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), rather than from education funding.

The most recent attempt to place "intergenerational literacy" programs in perspective is a report sponsored by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation: "Making the Nation Smarter: The Intergenerational Transfer of Cognitive Ability." (Sticht & McDonald, 1989). Based on a synthesis of research, this report suggests a need for a much closer dialogue between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers around the issue of adult literacy development, if the goal of cognitive transfer between the generations is to be realized. The report's recommendations are strong endorsements of taking contextual literacy development more seriously as the basis of policy and as an area in need of more "action research." Sticht and McDonald recommend that policymakers develop approaches to cognitive development that (1) give more attention to the role of non-school, social networks; (2) give more attention to the role of social environments in cognitive development; and (3) build on the strengths of diversity and pluralism in the United States.

What this report makes clear is that family and workplace literacy programs, as currently structured, need to be more informed by the cultural or social context of program participants. Attempts to establish these more contextual approaches to literacy development over the past four years are important first steps. However, there is a continuing need to examine the assumptions of these models in light of the latest research before using them as the basis of program and policy development.

BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTATION OF CONTEXTUAL LITERACY POLICY:

The Transfer Issue:

The major theoretical problem that is typically posed by critics of contextual literacy approaches deals with transfer of knowledge from one context to another. In fact, arguments in favor of a "cultural literacy" or a "common culture" suggest the provision of a certain body of knowledge or cultural vocabulary as the primary mechanisms of transfer. Advocates such as E.D. Hirsch have been the leading proponents of a national curriculum in elementary schools as the basis of a "common culture." Insofar as such proponents argue that "skills" cannot be developed outside of content knowledge, they find themselves in the same company as cognitive

psychologists like Tom Sticht. What Sticht's work with the military shows is that generic basic skills or literacy programs for adults have limited transfer to job-specific or "functional" reading tasks; whereas, Philippi's 1988 review of three military reading programs indicates the contrast--functional context reading programs can improve basic reading ability.

It could be that different cultural contexts act as "schema" through which literacy tasks demanded by the "common culture" have to be processed. These schema, or "patterns of prior knowledge," can be limiting in gaining access to broader cultural knowledge; on the other hand, when properly understood by practitioners, they can act as bridges to meaning. However this may be, it is clear that in programming for adults in need of literacy services, building upon the particular motivation or social context in which the adult operates is a better strategy than assuming that adults are "blank slates" who will apply their literacy skills in isolation or in satisfying demands that are primarily academic in nature.

The Issue of Definition:

Reservations about the transfer of knowledge gained in a particular context appear to be related to the view that literacy should be defined in terms that are readily understandable, that is, in grade level or generic terms. For instance, one of the most volatile issues in public discussions has been the number of adults who are illiterate, a concern that surfaced again in the recent amendments to the Adult Education Act:

> The Secretary, in consultation with the Congress shall, within the first 2 years after enactment of the Adult Education Amendments of 1988, make a determination of the criteria for defining literacy, taking into consideration reports prepared by the National Assessment of Educational Progress and others shall identify concretely those skills that comprise the basic educational skills needed for literate functioning. The Secretary, once the definition of literacy has been determined, shall, in consultation with the Congress and using the appropriate statistical sampling methodology, determine an accurate estimate of the number of illiterate adults in the Nation.

The importance of defining literacy in contextual terms, as seen in the NAEP **Profiles of America's Young Adults** cannot be understated. It stands in stark contrast to calls for a simpler, one-dimensional definition of literacy that would allow for a count by setting a "cut point," below which all adults would be termed "illiterate," above which all adults would be considered "literate." The debate between the perspective of policymakers and the consensus of the research community, as reflected in the NAEP study, will not be a merely academic one, for it may determine if the Federal government and the states will go about solving the wrong literacy problem. In the conclusion of their report, Kirsch and Jungblut seemed to anticipate such a possibility, arising from how the "literacy problem" (as opposed to "illiteracy") is understood:

"Awareness of these complex [information processing] skills and strategies deepens our understanding about the nature of literacy in our society. Difficulties associated with employing these skills and strategies characterize the literacy for much of the young adult population, not 'illiteracy' or the inability to decode print and comprehend simple textual materials (Kirsch & Jungblut, 1986). Simplifying the literacy problem into one of "illiteracy," that is, not taking into account the contextual nature of literacy use and development, may result in faulty policy prescriptions and underwrite mistaken adult literacy practice.

The Issue of Measurement:

The paradox of defining adult literacy in generic, grade-level terms is that the Federal effort to obtain an accurate estimate of illiterates may point toward solutions that are more school-based than functional or cultural. If literate functioning is defined by an eighth grade reading ability, for instance, it is likely that programs using standardized, norm-referenced tests will be encouraged to declare victory when it raises adult students to this level, in spite of the military research which showed that servicemen reading below an eighth grade level can function with job-related materials that are written two to three grade levels higher. The seriousness of establishing such a national standard for literacy is suggested by efforts in states to tie parole of prisoners to their ability to pass a reading test tied to norm-referenced, grade level reading ability. Again, the assumption is that performing at a certain grade level, as measured by a standardized test will equip adults with transferable skills for any context. In the case of prisoners, it is assumed that higher level reading skills, as taught in generic, basic skills programs, will make them more employable and lower the rate of recidivism. The issue surfaces again in the requirements of the new welfare reform legislation: states are called on to assess "basic literacy" as one indicator of welfare recipients' education levels.

The Issue of Effective Literacy Instruction:

If policymakers are concerned about serving low literate adults as much as they are about counting them or setting up a national standard of literacy, attempts to develop effective programs should be marked by the involvement of other literacy providers in addition to the public school or community college system in the states. The Adult Education Act and the Job Training Partnership Act, major sources of funding for adult literacy programs in state block grant programs, allow for this involvement; in practice, non-profit, community-based groups are typically involved only at the margins of funding, state planning, and policy development. Decisions about funding priorities continue to be skewed in the direction of literacy/basic skill providers who are already part of the established educational system. Efforts to increase accountability, provide for stricter evaluation, and build literacy delivery "systems" may tend to solidify the influence of institutionally-based providers even more.

The Congress has evidently recognized the need to counterbalance this tendency by setting aside funds for community-based literacy providers of English language literacy to adults. And, at least by implication, the Adult Education Act has recognized the role of community-based, non-profit groups by requiring states to give preference in funding to groups "who have demonstrated or can demonstrate a capability to recruit and serve educationally disadvantaged adults" (Section 322). These adults are defined by the Act as those who demonstrate "basic skills equivalent to or below that of students at the fifth grade level" or those who have been "placed in the lowest or beginning level of an adult education program when that program does not use grade level equivalences as a measure of students' basic skills." Typically, these adults are hardest to recruit and the most difficult to retain in standard adult education or basic skills classes. Groups that serve them may be more likely to understand the contexts of such adults; but curricula for adults functioning at this level are not necessarily contextual in approach, nor are the teachers/volunteers working with them necessarily aware of the importance of the adult's prior knowledge in providing instruction.

CHALLENGES FOR CONTEXTUAL POLICY DEVELOPMENT

> We believe that existing communities and social groups are legitimate sources of personal and group identity. At the same time, however, we support programs that increase the skills of community to interact and change the mainstream culture and its institutions. This would incorporate the positive values of the communities and enable their members to participate more fully in the social and economic life of the broader society. (Hunter & Harman, 1979)

What is required to meet the challenges of adult literacy development, is a better understanding of the cultural contexts in which adults function, especially as those cultures' values may put them or their children at odds with the values and institutions of "literate," more school-oriented culture. Only with the proper understanding of these starting points can practitioners and policymakers design programs that promote the transfer of learning from one cultural context to another.

Implications for Education and Welfare Reform:

One significant body of research that illuminates the importance of cultural knowledge for more successful educational intervention among the economically disadvantaged is that of Shirley Brice Heath. Heath's point of departure differs from that of most education researchers in ways that literacy researchers find most compelling; that is, her research does not use a school-based

model to analyze the literacy practices that occur in "at-risk" homes:

> Traditionally, education research has emphasized the need to train parents of children who are not successful in school achievement to conform to school practices. Knowledge had proceeded along a one-way path from school to 'culturally different' communities. In this research the movement of ideas along that path was made two-way, so that a we-they dichotomy did not develop. (Heath, 1983)

What Heath's work found was that there were not distinctive differences between groups in terms of their literacy-related practices in the home, but that the practices of lower socio-economic parents did not necessarily meet school expectations and that teachers often did not appreciate the "patterns of prior knowledge" which lower-class black and white students brought with them to school. (Cole & Griffin, 1987). This line of research suggests that literacy development in schools may not reinforce that which "at-risk" children experience at home--not that their parents do not engage in literacy-related practices. The changes needed, in other words, may be those of the school to support and encourage the "spontaneous acquisition" of literacy as it occurs in non-school terms.

A different line of research that has a bearing on the importance of out-of-school learning is that of cognitive psychologists such as Lauren Resnick. In **Education and Learning to Think** (1987) Resnick pointed out the difference between individual cognition in school versus cognition outside of school. In drawing out the implications of Resnick's research for rethinking education reform, Berryman (1988) summarized the difference in this way:

> For the most part, school is designed so that one student's success or failure at a task is independent of what other students do (aside from grading on a curve). By contrast, a great deal of activity outside of school is socially shared: work, personal life, and recreation take place in social systems in which what one person is able to do depends fundamentally on what others do and in which 'successful' functioning depends upon the mesh of several individuals' mental and physical performances.

The thrust of these two lines of research, which again reinforce the importance of social context, has implications for adult literacy as well as for education reform and welfare reform. Programs that target welfare recipients as mandated participants in education and job training appear to be the most in need of informed policymaking at the state level. Planning in the states to deal with this special population of adults may be marred by the tendency to view the participants and outcomes in school-based terms. A different approach, however, may be called for if the Congressional intent is to be served--if, in fact, welfare recipients are to improve their functional skills and become more self-supporting. Such an approach is suggested by the use of community

"literacy helpers," another contextual strategy suggested by adult literacy research that has yet to be implemented.

This particular strategy has been articulated most persuasively in some of the work of the National Adult Literacy Project. "Giving Literacy Away" called for the discovery and recruitment of persons who act as informal literacy providers in assisting low literate adults with reading, writing, and other functional tasks (Reder & Green, 1985). In this monograph and in an accompanying training guide, the authors explain how to better serve those least likely to seek literacy assistance in a formal program, but who may be most in need.

> One way to do this is to recruit literacy helpers to be tutors, thereby gaining greater access to the hard-to-reach, and provide relevant literacy training based on first-hand knowledge of individuals' needs and interests. This outreach strategy may have a number of different outcomes. At the least, it is a way to awaken community members to their potential for doing more than just helping someone when he or she needs to read or write something.

An underlying assumption of this strategy is that literacy development outside of school environments is marked by collaborative practice, an extension of the parent-child model whereby adults barter as equals: literacy assistance is a "good" shared with others in exchange, perhaps, for other skills and abilities possessed by low literate adults (Fingeret, 1983). Among the functional tasks that are approached collaboratively is negotiating the welfare system. One adult may act as the reader or "scribe" in deciphering the bureaucratese of welfare agency communications or forms while another acts as the specialist in negotiating orally with social workers or health professionals. The recent welfare reform legislation will present new functional challenges to these collaborative networks.

Under the Family Support Act of 1988, all welfare recipients and applicants are to be informed of their new obligations and their entitlements to education and training. For those applicants and recipients who are "non-exempt," direct receipt of welfare benefits will become contingent upon enrollment in a job training, literacy, or adult education program. Assuming that written notices and information provided will retain much of the complexity of the regulations governing this act, policymakers at the state level should consider how a contextual literacy policy that uses social networks in the first instance can help insure understanding of these new requirements and entitlements. Understanding categories of persons who are "non-exempt" may be the first obstacle for policymakers, not to mention "literacy helpers." In fact, assisting such support networks in the development of literacy strategies around the new regulations can become the basis for helping move the community toward greater economic and educational opportunity. Obviously, such an approach also calls for a more comprehensive vision of the problems facing

communities in which welfare recipients reside, a vision that goes beyond the "coordination" that is mandated between welfare, job training, and education agencies by the Family Support Act.

In developing a state welfare reform strategy, reliance upon existing state agencies and traditional, school-based approaches to literacy development may be the path of least resistance, but it will not build bridges between communities. Nor is the mandated literacy or job training provided likely to be reinforced in the "at-risk" cultures if it is not understood more positively--that is, as personally relevant and functional--by the persons it is intended to help. Success in education and welfare reform will stand or fall by the social meaning that is attached to literacy and basic skills development by communities of educationally and economically disadvantaged adults. As one critic of "overselling literacy" has aptly stated: "Literacy is good for several things, all of which have to be demonstrated personally; they are not compelling if simply talked about. No one learns to be literate on promissory notes of what literacy will do for them" (Smith, 1989). Recourse to social contexts, then, is not primarily an academic exercise if the policy goals affecting the economically and educationally disadvantaged are to be realized.

It seems to be left to policymakers at the state level to begin to tailor literacy strategies that are informed by the particular social contexts of their communities. States are required in all major social service block grant programs to submit plans for meeting the needs of educationally and economically disadvantaged adults. Policy development typically requires coordination and provides the opportunity to place the educational "deficiencies" of adults or children in more comprehensive frameworks. A contextual approach to the problem of adult literacy offers an opportunity in economic development, welfare reform, and education reform to forge new strategies that will develop communities, strengthen families, and provide greater opportunities to children and adults most "at-risk."

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